

CHAPTER ONE

Growing Up

I should have known I would have a strange life when my father dragged home the body of a wrecked helicopter from an airport graveyard one summer day in 1953. He hauled the thing on a trailer pulled by a run-down truck. But then I was only three years old, and how should I know what a normal childhood was? Further back I have no memory.

We already had several abandoned vehicles behind our ivy-covered mansion, to the chagrin of our neighbors. Aside from these cars and trucks, our three-car garage full of motors, transmissions, axles, differentials, brake drums, and innumerable other spare parts, bore witness to my father's vehicular passion. I spent as much time as my mother permitted with my brothers playing among the parts and vehicles. But she tried to keep me busy inside the house, and hemmed me in with pink lace outfits and shiny patent leather shoes—attire wholly inappropriate for the precious few hours I eked out for myself in the male wonderland, a world just beyond my grasp.

The unexpected visit of our impeccably dressed neighbor, Mr. Marshall Glover III, signaled the beginning of the end of our Beverly Hills years. One evening Mr. Glover III rang our doorbell to complain about the presence of the helicopter shell in our affluent neighborhood and to demand its removal. During the ensuing squabble I slipped unnoticed out the back door and into the helicopter, which had come to rest in the area between our mansion and Mr. Glover's.

The cockpit was full of dials, switches, gauges, handles, levers and other magic objects, which I—lost to the world—pressed, switched, pulled and rotated. A sling made of canvas straps hung from the ceiling of the fuselage. I managed to pull myself up and settle into it. I was able to swing back and forth when I pushed my feet against the back of the co-pilot's seat. Then, with the mere flip of a mental switch, I was cruising above the nearby Pacific Ocean on a secret mission of my own making.

"Megan . . . MEGAN? MEGAN LLOYD, WHERE ARE YOU? DOVE SEI?" My mother's voice pierced my aerial reveries. Whenever she was upset she threw in some Italian. I heard other voices too, now nearby, now far away, but I didn't move, hoping they wouldn't find me. Eventually, footsteps approached, and my mother's head of thick black hair emerged in the gaping hole through which paratroopers had jumped. She surveyed the interior until she spied me. "Grazie a Dio!" The relief came first, then the anger. "Good grief, bambina! What *are* you doing all tangled up in that old parachute? *I knew* your father went too far with this helicopter. First the neighbors are angry, and now you get lost in it."

"I'm not lost," I insisted.

"Here Megan, let me get you out of that," she said, and extricated me from the parachute and from a ride more thrilling than ponies or tricycles or anything I'd yet experienced.

I was about to protest, but at that moment, she cried out, "I found her. She's in the helicopter!" Three more sets of footsteps approached on the run.

"Is she all right?" My two brothers and my father blurted out the question simultaneously, as they came to a halt and peered inside.

"She's all tangled up in this parachute. She could have been strangled. You get rid of this awful helicopter," she hissed at my father, or I'll never sleep with you again!"

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A year later we moved, helicopter, vehicles and all, into a deserted arm of Mandeville Canyon in the suburban west side of Los Angeles—I don't think it was just because of my parachute ride in the helicopter. By then I had quit worrying whether my mother slept with my father or not. My brothers and I all slept not only in separate beds, but in separate rooms in Beverly Hills. So why shouldn't *they* sleep apart? For some reason, only my parents shared one big bed and one bedroom at night. It was fun to crawl in with them once in a while and

get lost in the sea of covers and bodies, but my mother never let me stay very long. She never got herself a separate bed either. Once, in the middle of the night when I woke up and wandered out to the cocktail salon, I saw her asleep in her bathrobe in an easy chair, a book spread out face down on her bosom. I tiptoed up close to find her mouth open and hear her snore. She and my father continued to eat together, along with the rest of us, so I figured if my mother preferred the big easy chair to their bed, it was all right with me.

My mother loved Beverly Hills, but my father hated it. He told her wealth created false values and that they'd be better off to raise the children farther away from society, in, say, a country environment—after all, their children were the most important things in their lives. Later on I learned that all three of us had been mistakes—or were at least, “unplanned.” Not that they didn't seem to want us. It was just that my father had a greater love than the love for something as commonplace and easy to come by as children—a love for things mechanical, for the smooth functioning logic of the machine. His devotion was something only a particular type of mind at the dawn of the modern technological explosion could comprehend. He waxed absolutely poetic whenever someone did him the favor of asking, “How's the junkyard, Art?” His vocabulary stood ready—“the miracle of technology . . . the quality and artistry of precision parts . . . the intelligence, exquisite beauty and clean perfection inherent in fine design and craftsmanship.” Yet there was another side to him. He was given to sudden and rambling reveries about the “starry night skies” that had been so much more brilliant in his youth before city lights and air pollution had dimmed them. He loved machines, but at the same time was often contemptuous of the civilization that had produced them. And then there were his cultured manners and classical music which, unlike his junkyard, he kept to himself.

My father had an inimical way of endearing himself to the rich and famous. Not only did he close the front door on Marshall Glover III the evening he dropped by to complain, but another legendary episode of family history was born shortly before we moved away from Beverly Hills. Several versions were told for years around our dinner table, but the version I remember went like this: the well-known sculptor, Marcel Corbin, also found occasion to relay his opinion of my father's helicopter over cocktails at the Beverly Hills Union Club, and in so doing dropped the word “eyesore.” Thoroughly baffled, my father protested, “Eyesore, my foot! You, of all people, should know

better. Has your aesthetic sense taken a vacation? That helicopter is one of the finest examples of quality American workmanship and utilitarianism. The stress calculations for its rotor are a hundred times more critical than the angles in your statues. Molding a bust is crude child's play compared to wiring the helicopter's vast and complex electrical system." My father left the meeting irritated and remained rankled by the conversation the rest of that infamous day. According to my mother, his last words before going to sleep had been, "that barbarian Frenchman!"

My parents called their new fifteen-acre arm of Mandeville Canyon a "rustic haven." I remember my father trying to convince my mother to make the move. She had no desire to leave our "lovely Beverly Hills villa," for some "dusty old canyon," while he argued that it would be good to own a "rustic haven." It would provide us with a silent hub in the midst of a growing metropolis, for enjoying art, classical music and mechanical pursuits. I remember him clearly during one of these discussions—an imposing man of Scandinavian descent on the veranda overlooking our enormous Roman-style swimming pool. He wore an ivory silk dressing gown and held a scotch in a Steuben crystal glass in one hand. The afternoon sunlight caught and turned his smooth blond hair and perfect, razor-thin moustache almost white. His parents had long ago anglicized their Norwegian name to "Lloyd," but for me my father embodied something of the far northern summers of continual daylight. At moments like this he seemed the incorporation of Apollonian radiance and reason. Inside our house, his appearance was always immaculate; only his eternally dirty fingernails gave away his mechanical passion.

As usual, my mother, elegant but brooding, languished and sighed in response to his comments in her cushioned patio chair, her southern emotions hidden behind dark eyes. My two brothers had inherited her dark hair and complexion, while I looked more like my father—light, blond and Scandinavian. My skin tanned to a deep brown during the warm summers, but no one could account for my green eyes. Now, as my father tried to win his point, he suddenly took off on a verbal flight of fancy, as if he were describing a piece of machinery: ". . . that rustic haven would provide us with an inviolate bit of paradise, an innocent refuge, pure and isolated from the world, in communion with itself alone." But I don't think he convinced my mother until he uttered the words, "We could build a new mansion on it." In the meantime, there was a little old cottage and a horse stable and cor-

ral already there, and we could live in it until the new abode was finished. The children could all enjoy the advantages of unpretentious, healthy outdoor living away from the effete snobs of Beverly Hills. We could turn up the console to allow his classical music to echo off the hills. And finally, there would be plenty of room out of the sight of snooty neighbors for his rare mechanical collection.

When we three kids saw the canyon for the first time, we were all on our father's side. A "rustic haven" was the same thing as kids' heaven. It meant you turned off the main paved road, and passed the metal "No Trespassing" sign with the bullet holes in it. Then you wound along a dusty dirt road next to a small gully and past gnarled oak trees that grew on hillsides full of wild chaparral, lizards, gophers, snakes and rumors of Indian relics. It meant hours and days of exploration, and fantastic games of hide and seek and blindman's buff in cool dark labyrinths of wild vegetation with narrow branching stream beds, and who knew what other treasures. The cottage was small, but that never bothered us three kids or my father, because we lived for the outdoors. In fact we all spread our wings. But with no room for it inside, my mother's washing machine was hooked up outside next to the back porch beside a long clothes line my father constructed for her between the porch and a laurel tree. He put her dryer in mothballs, saying that sun-dried fabrics were better for your skin. I could never understand why she didn't prefer doing the laundry outside, but one day as she hung up clothes, I overheard her say to my father, "I can't stand this healthy, rustic life. It was bad enough giving up the servants, but it's humiliating doing laundry outside." He countered that she should overcome her false snobbery now that they were free of Beverly Hills. Besides, no one could see her in the canyon except us, so how could it be humiliating? And she argued back, "What about low-flying airplanes?" and, "When are you starting on the new mansion you promised?" I don't think she adjusted as well as the rest of us to the changes. Eventually, she talked about the necessity of accepting one's fate in life.

Life in our rustic haven went on for a number of years without the promised new mansion, but not for lack of money. My father was simply too busy with his mechanical collection to take the trouble to get the project off the ground. To appease my mother he hid the ugliest objects in the stable that came with the canyon. The helicopter, his pride and joy, came to rest between the stable and an equipment shed. Around the other vehicles, my mother had vines and vegetation

planted in an attempt to hide them from public scrutiny. My father argued that this was wasted effort, since no one could see his collection in the canyon, but my mother continued to worry about low-flying pilots and some sort of principle involved.

After my oldest brother, Jeff, mastered the electric saw and the art of hammering, he built himself an elaborate, two-room treehouse. My second brother, Chris, who wanted to raise snakes and sell their eggs for profit, built himself a large terrarium behind the house. The first fat snake he bought delivered herself of a clutch of 19 eggs, which, once hatched, yielded the same number of sleek wriggly silver babies that glistened in the sunshine. He fed the familial tangle with rodents caught in mousetraps and frogs he caught with his hands. He managed to sell a total of three snake eggs in two years to friends in his cub scout troop, who thought they were "boss."

Jeff's boy scout troop had its first camp-out in sleeping bags behind our house one weekend. Somehow, Chris's original mother snake, Marsha, now mature and sluggish at a full four feet in length, escaped from the terrarium in the night and terrorized one of the new scout members from 5 until 6 A.M. Sunday morning. She crawled onto his sleeping bag and stretched herself out for a sun bath in the early light of dawn. The brave scout, asleep on his back, was awakened by Marsha's impressive weight as she moved onto his abdomen. When he realized what had come to rest on him, his body froze and he stopped breathing. Without making a sound, he emptied his bladder and bowels into his sleeping bag, convinced he'd seen his last hours at the tender age of twelve, until the other scouts began to stir around 6 A.M. Their voices and motions sent Marsha on her way, and her presence in their midst, once noticed, created an uproar such as hadn't been heard since Indians danced in Mandeville Canyon.

After lengthy discussions between both parties' attorneys, the parents of the traumatized scout graciously declined to take legal action against my parents. And the brave young survivor earned two more merit badges than any other troop member that year. Jeff decided that his reputation had been ruined by association with Chris's negligence and idiotic hobby. One week after the unfortunate episode, Chris discovered his terrarium empty. After a frantic search he found all his snakes frozen solid in a grotesque Medusaesque knot in the deep freezer. As a result of the screaming brawl that ensued between my brothers, my father grounded them temporarily "for life." My mother ceased preparing frozen food for several months, but eventu-

ally my father announced that snake meat was a delicacy, and gradually our chicken dishes began to contain morsels which tasted more exotic than anything my mother had fixed before.

Some time after the snake episode died down, Jeff, by promising to wash and polish the Mercedes sedan once a week for the next century, persuaded my father to buy him a motorbike. Soon he had worn an enviable dirt bike track into two of the canyon hillsides far enough away from the cottage so that you couldn't see them, but close enough that you could hear a high-pitched, unmuffled whine buzzing away for hours on weekends—a noise which never bothered the rest of us, but which was “insufferably nerve-grating,” according to my mother.

Looking back on it, I can see that my life took a turn for the better in the canyon. My mother quit dressing me in pink lace dresses and shiny patent leather shoes and got me some good things to wear—jeans, T-shirts and sneakers. I started to do more on my own. As soon as I could tie my own shoe laces, I would leave my bed at the crack of dawn on weekend mornings to be with my father and brothers. Jeff's and Chris's farming and reptile crazes were behind them, and they began to occupy themselves in and around the stables and the junkyard where they worked on vehicles along with my father. Jeff gradually added a sub-collection of scooters, motorbikes and motorcycles to my father's large-vehicle collection. My brothers didn't really like my presence there, but I wanted to be where the action was. As much as possible, I avoided the cottage, my mother and my grandmother, who had come to live with us. Since, according to my father, servants remained inappropriate to our new country lifestyle, the adult women spent their days making homemade pasta and tomato sauces, speaking Italian, listening to operas on the radio, rounding us up for meals, and washing clothes and dishes. Thank goodness they said I was too young to help. Probably they preferred their own company (occasionally, my mother dressed up, took her mother and the Mercedes sedan and spent a day on Rodeo Drive). But I also think they believed a light blond female was genetically incapable of learning to cook, so I fell through the cracks in their categories.

My father was different. By the time I was six, my regular presence in the junkyard was established. That's when he decided I should learn to do something useful, like grind valves. Jeff and Chris could already ride and repair motorbikes, and Jeff was overhauling the 1930 Chevrolet. My father was busy with one of his Duesenbergs when he gave me some grinding compound one morning and set me in front of

32 valves which were lined up in numbered holes drilled through a block of wood. He demonstrated how to twist them back and forth till the edges were smooth. I loved my work. When I finished the valves, he put a wire brush and a black rag in my hands and set me in front of a tub of cleaning solvent and a pile of dirty black engine parts. Then he showed me how to clean off the grease. When I was done, they looked like new and I looked like a chimney sweep.

One Saturday afternoon, when I bolted out of the cottage to head for the junkyard, I found my father and my brothers standing side by side watching something. It was Roxie, our small brown and white Collie who stood there glued to a strange dog who was propped up against her rear end with its paws on her back. Roxie tolerated this affront unperturbed, but it didn't seem right to me that this strange dog should lean on her like that. So I asked the assembled audience, "Shouldn't we try to unstick them?" Everybody ignored me in stony silence and continued to stare at the dogs until the stray mutt quit rocking back and forth and they separated on their own. That was all there was to it, but it left me with the uneasy feeling that Roxie had been somehow wronged while nobody had come to her rescue. Sometime later, rather vague in my mind, Roxie had a litter of puppies in the stable. She and my mother cared for the pups, and it wasn't until I was much older and wiser that I connected the two events in my mind.

During the next years, following my introduction to auto mechanics, I also became an expert in several other pursuits—naturalism, guerilla warfare and baseball. With my boyfriend from elementary school, Stevie Carpenter, who played first base in a little league baseball team, I learned to pitch, catch and bat. But when I decided to join his team, I was summarily turned down because of a reason beyond my comprehension—my sex. What sex had to do with the ability to catch, throw or bat a ball, I couldn't understand. I could bat and catch better than Stevie, and I threw at least equally well, but everyone told me that girls just didn't do that. I mean, I couldn't even apply to the Little League, because they didn't have application forms for girls. Period. No one would say why I couldn't use a boy's application form.

What was left were the boy scout activities, the long hide-and-seek afternoons, and all kinds of war games in the upper acres of the canyon—one enormous, jungle-like playground for me, my brothers and the scouts, who despite the snake terrorism weekend, continued to hold camp-outs on my parents' land. Often we got the neighborhood kids from down on the paved streets, who were lucky enough to

be allowed to associate with us canyon kids, to join us. When there were enough of us, we divided up into two small armies and played hide-and-seek, and discover and ambush for hours. I loved to play the spy and was good at it. I could penetrate into the enemy's territory and learn their secret plans better than anyone else because I knew the terrain like the back of my hand. I had hiked several times with my brothers to the top of our long, narrow canyon and back. I had forded streams, straddled crevasses, slid down rock slides on my behind, climbed vertical surfaces clinging to roots, caught lizards and collected polliwogs. I knew the difference between a garter snake and a rattlesnake. I could spot a loose stone before I stepped on it. I knew which branch to hang onto, and I could start a campfire with one match and no paper every time—more than you could say for ninety-five percent of the boy scouts I knew. I had a sizeable rock collection which included a spectacular piece of peacock copper and a colorful piece of petrified wood from Arizona, and I could explain to you the differences between sedimentary and igneous stones. For our war games, I discovered and appropriated for myself the best trees for look-out points, the safe underbrush devoid of poison oak, the cave in the eroded bank and the concrete storm-drain pipe that everybody else was afraid to enter. *My* dough biscuits on sticks were good, I knew, better than any of the scouts', whose skills hardly impressed me.

But I was envious just the same. I couldn't join the Boy Scouts any more than I could join the Little League, my outdoor skills notwithstanding. All the while, the boys accumulated sharp-looking merit badges on their sashes and moved up from rank to rank. Instead, I had to join the Brownies and Girl Scouts and content myself with learning various household arts and crafts, activities for which I exhibited no talent.

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Once, while I was still Brownie age, my family was invited by a scientist and his wife to join them for a weekend near Palm Springs to explore some of the canyons and caves which formed the San Andreas earthquake fault. I was enthralled with the prospect. Canyons away from home. Would they be better or different from our canyon? New territory offered an opportunity to prove my skills on different turf.

We arrived in the prearranged trailer park about noon with our Mercedes sedan and Airstream trailer and located the Carlsons in their trailer. Towards evening we drove out into the desert where Dr. Carlson took all of us—men, women and children—on a short walk

through some of the small canyons and caves which were part of the large earthquake fault. I was awed by this new piece of wilderness, but the pace was a little slow for my taste. That is, my mother and Mrs. Carlson slowed us down (at least they left grandmother back at the trailer). No matter. The next day was the big, all-day hike, and that evening I caught a real live tarantula in an old tin can. I broke one of her legs accidentally as I pushed her with a stick into the can. My father transferred her to a jar of alcohol to better preserve her, but not before he gassed her to death, with a quick spray of butane from a canister in the trailer.

That night in the desert I could hardly sleep. Cozy in my trailer bunk above Chris, I tossed and turned and thought of Amaryllis in her jar, and how I'd found and captured her, and how we'd go hiking the next day—caves, dirt trails, the company of boys and men. During the night I woke up several times, always hoping it would be light. Finally, I couldn't help myself and fell into a deep sleep. I dreamed about a silver lizard who made its abode in an abandoned Duesenberg carburetor in the desert, and lived off dough biscuits it dug out of tarantula holes. The tarantulas fought against this thievery by snapping at the lizard with black pincers, but the lizard was faster and succeeded in knocking all the stolen biscuits into his carburetor home with his tail. At one point the lizard shot biscuits towards the saguaro cactus next to me. To get a better look at this struggle to the death, I jumped into the air and rose slowly off the ground. I flapped my arms like a bird to increase momentum and rose higher and higher until I hovered safely over the arid battles that were played out far below.

When I opened my eyes, I was alone in the trailer. The sun was high in the sky, so it had to be late in the morning. The sheets and blankets on Chris's bunk were jumbled up and he was gone, as was everybody else. Sensing something afool, I scrambled down, pulled on my jeans, T-shirt and sneakers and ran over to the Carlson's trailer which was parked next to ours. The Carlson's jeep was gone. I burst into their trailer and my heart sank. There sat Mrs. Carlson, my mother and grandmother at their breakfast table drinking coffee. "Where *is* everybody?" I cried frantically.

"Why, *we're* here," my mother answered with a slight touch of annoyance, "and your father and brothers have gone with Dr. Carlson to explore the earthquake fault." My nine-year-old world collapsed. Betrayed. But by whom? The men or the women?

"But why did they go without *me*?"

“Well bambina, you were so sound asleep nobody wanted to wake you,” my grandmother offered.

I knew and they knew, this was a lame excuse, if not a dirty lie, so I waited for more. “And . . . well . . .,” my mother hesitated but felt obliged to continue. “It was going to be an all-day hike, and it’s probably too difficult and tiring for you, Megan.” Another lame excuse. I stared her down and waited for something more plausible. “And . . . well Megan, you know they are all men except for you, and what if you had to go to the bathroom? Why, you would have no privacy!”

Suddenly her voice gained conviction. I was thunderstruck. So *what* if I had to go to the bathroom? *I* could find a big rock to hide behind without stepping on a reptile. But my mother grew taciturn, and her argument suggested a realm of mystery I had no right to question.

I held my tongue, but I suffered all day long in the presence of the women. Even when they took me to the swimming pool, I felt cheated. And I didn’t want to hear the stories the men told when we all sat around dinner that evening. I excused myself early and went back to the trailer to contemplate Amaryllis. I decided I preferred her dead. I would have been uneasy with a live tarantula in my room, because anything living might possibly escape, and then what? A ray from the setting sun shone through her jar, and I watched the thousands of flecks of indeterminate nature—dust and hair as well as bits and pieces of her body—in a state of suspension, signaling the beginning of the process of physical deterioration, of her gradual diffusion into component parts.

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Back home in our canyon I was still pretty much master of my own world, and at school I found that Amaryllis created the biggest sensation by far in show-and-tell in both fourth and fifth grades. However, in sixth grade Otto Fredericks brought his tonsils and adenoids in an oblong vial of green formaldehyde to show-and-tell. I realized from the gasps of my schoolmates that Amaryllis would take second place to this gauche display, and I decided it was below her dignity to be shown in the same company. I discreetly left her jar in my lunch pail, and when Miss Bailey asked me what I had brought, I apologized for having forgotten to bring what I had intended, but promised to remember it for next time. Fortunately, Miss Bailey forgot to ask me next time, and I retired Amaryllis from public life. She continued to occupy the place of honor, however, on my dresser for another year. Eventually, hairs and pieces of her limbs grew thicker on the bottom of her

jar than on her body. When I told my father about it, he said he'd take care of it. The next day Amaryllis was gone. I asked no questions.

When Stevie Carpenter and I were eleven years old, we developed a new game he called "King of the Mountain." We used our favorite honeysuckle-covered bank near the dead oak tree. We'd face each other at the top, and at the signal, try to shove or wrestle the other one down to the bottom while retaining one's own position at the top. Anything was allowed—except pulling hair or other dirty tactics. Strength and physical contact were everything, and we were pretty evenly matched. Part of the time I was able to force him down and scramble back to the top before he caught my foot or a leg to pull me back, and part of the time he would announce his sovereignty from above while I extricated myself from the bushes and readied myself for the next onslaught. The rest of the time we both rolled down to the bottom together in a tangle of arms and legs. Panting, we tried to hold each other down while we looked for an opportunity to make our own get-away for another ascent. This went on for hours and we never tired of it. We didn't keep score, and I grew to like it better than batting practice.

When Stevie and I turned twelve we both had to join the Presbyterian youth group in Brentwood. We went miniature-golfing, had picnics at the beach, sang in the youth choir, and eventually had parties where we had to dance with members of the opposite sex. At the first dance, he chose fat Janet Macintosh for his partner. I was sore at him for months and finally told him that I'd always thought his baseball playing stank.

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About that time my father finally got around to building the new mansion he had promised my mother. The old cabin was torn down and his vehicle collection reduced to the items he could store in a new barn out of sight of what came to be called our new home. That "new home" wrecked our canyon idyll. It had another large Roman swimming pool like the one in Beverly Hills. A huge redwood deck and fence surrounded it, and eventually a hedge of red bougainvillea covered the fence. My brothers and I had separate bedrooms again. My mother had her very own washing and ironing room. But with the mansion, servants returned and she didn't have to bother anymore with washing and ironing.

The house was too big, with too many rooms, many of them empty, and long corridors. The kitchen was large and airy with a sky-

light. Everybody spent more time indoors. There was a wet-bar, an elaborate stereo system in the living room, a pool table in the glass-covered sun room at the far end of the house that my father and brothers often used. But no one would teach me how to play. There were three flagstone fireplaces. For a while we kids got our friends together and roasted marshmallows in the big one in the living room in memory of boy scout days. But soon my brothers grew tired of this, and I gave it up too when I was reduced to doing it by myself.

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I started puberty about the same time as my girlfriends, and I didn't really mind, because the good times I'd spent with the boys seemed to be over. I used sanitary napkins for the first couple of years, but then my more progressive girlfriends convinced me, with a tone of condescension, that tampons were far superior. I envied them, and wondered why I was so out of it, so I persuaded my mother to buy me some, and when my next period came around, tried to use one. But, alas, I couldn't figure it out. I reread the directions and tried to make sense out of the anatomical drawing to no avail as I struggled with the little cardboard tube in the bathroom. Waking her from a nap, I confided my dilemma to my mother. She said she'd tell me how babies were made in detail when I turned eighteen. Then she went back to sleep and we never talked about it again.

Determined to solve the tampon dilemma on my own, I saved the anatomical drawing and used it as a place mark in a book I began to read on the sly—*Sex in a Happy Marriage*, written in 1933 by a German doctor, Johan von Wilamowitz, M.D.—that had gathered dust in an obscure spot on my parents' bookshelves for at least as long as I was aware of its existence, and probably longer. The cover page contained an inscription in my grandmother's handwriting to my mother: "May you avoid all the problems I had," dated November 29, 1935, my parents' wedding day. I studied this volume line by line from cover to cover. I especially pondered the sentences and paragraphs which were underlined or commented upon in my mother's hand, although they seemed to deal primarily with issues of hygiene.

At a favorable opportunity, after everyone had gone to bed one night, I set out to explore my intimate parts with my hands, convinced from my studies that I too must have the anatomy capable of holding a tampon, even a penis, according to the marriage book. Besides that, I was supposed to have a clitoris, too, about which the marriage book was a little vague, except to say it was very sensitive to the touch. In an

immature way, it might or might not have something to do with “climaxes” and “orgasms,” the culmination of sexual bliss in a happy marriage. Orgasms, moreover, were something which perhaps even some women occasionally enjoyed as a result of intercourse with their husbands (I couldn’t tell whether Dr. von Wilamowitz approved of this for women or not, but he made clear that they definitely enjoyed it very much in a vicarious sort of way when their husbands had climaxes). I didn’t really understand these new terms. I was mainly interested in how to use a tampon.

After some careful checking, I located what was what, according to the anatomical guide from the tampon box. Reassured, I explored myself with my hands. Continually cross-checking with my reference texts, I became satisfied that things were normal and focused my explorations on the clitoris.

Much to my surprise, the little spot was not only sensitive to the touch, as Dr. Wilamowitz had predicted, it hardened and felt good. The more attention I gave it, the better it felt, and I didn’t see any reason to stop. I began to wonder if I could approximate marital bliss in this way all by myself.

When my manipulations reached a frantic pace and my leg muscles tensed, a strong wave of euphoria spread out from the miraculous spot and vibrated throughout my entire body, making me want to cry out and gasp for breath. After a moment’s pause, I resumed rubbing, cautiously at first, and then more rapidly until another wave swept through my body that set my head turning from side to side from sheer pleasure. I let that one subside and decided to try a third time. No sweat. Another electric arc to heaven for a few blissful moments. And again. Were these orgasms?

I interrupted my experiment to reread the relevant pages of Dr. von Wilamowitz. He confirmed to my satisfaction that these *were* the orgasms meant to bring bliss in a marriage, and I decided that in some important way I had become a woman. As the physical intensity subsided and I grew sleepy, I remembered that I’d had similar sensations riding horseback as a little girl.

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Dear Gordon,

How strange to see the days of my daughter’s childhood through her own eyes. The things she recalls, the things she does not and the things that seem humorous, distorted, criss-crossed, mixed in with other events as time seems to overtake itself. Or perhaps it is my own

biased recall, the warped prism of my own mind. I was totally unaware of her early interest in male competition and sex, for example.

I reread this chapter of our family life together many times. With all of its lack of conventionality—canyon, tarantula, junkyard—I have to admit it was a world all of my own reality around which everything else revolved. But isn't it fair to conclude that she enjoyed a relatively happy childhood? The simple ebb and flow of emotions, the little tragedies. What looms large in a child's mind constitutes a mere trifle in the everyday routine of the adult world—the incident with the dogs or her hiding in the helicopter fuselage. No mention of the many times she fell asleep on my lap while I listened to classical music. No trace of memory in her about the time she went under in the swimming pool at the age of six. I stood frozen at the edge, transfixed until she slowly turned towards me, her green eyes wide open. Then I dove in fully dressed and pulled her out.

But after that came the moment when time itself stood still, paralyzed. If it had not been for that moment, life would have taken an entirely different direction, for her and for me. That slight slippage on the surface of reality, that mere wing flap of a butterfly that is said to put into motion great meteorological events—storms and hurricanes. It was an event unique in my life, of a different order and magnitude altogether, that changed everything. For many years I wanted to believe it wasn't really me on that day, but an imposter of myself, usurping my place. My mind tried to flee from the incident, to wrap itself up in a cocoon, to find excuses for my crime against nature, Gordon. It is a living torture for me to bring this story to the surface now, this monster I have hidden for twenty-five years. But this is my last chance to let it out.

As close as I can determine, it took place within two years of the point at which she cuts off this narrative of her early life. I will try to recount it now as accurately as possible.

It was a warm, summer Sunday afternoon in 1965. Megan was fifteen and I was fifty-five. We were the only ones at home. Megan was sunbathing and listening to a transistor radio on the large lawn in the back, between the house and the pool. She had blossomed from a daredevil tomboy into a self-absorbed young female, and she wore a scant yellow bathing suit—the first two-piece suit her mother allowed her to own. I had finished some work outdoors and decided to take the rest of the afternoon off. I went into the house, showered and put on my robe. In the living room I put on a recording of Schubert's *Die schöne*

Müllerin and sat down on the easy chair to enjoy the sad tale of unrequited love between the young apprentice lad and the miller's beautiful daughter. By the third side, I grew drowsy and would have fallen asleep had it not been for the sudden sound of rock and roll that came from Megan's room at the other end of the house. It startled and annoyed me. I got up and looked out the window and saw that she was no longer on the lawn outside. I walked down the corridor to the bedroom wing and found the door to her room ajar. Her plastic radio lay on the pillow next to her head and the sounds of some teenage crooner clashed with the voice of Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau coming from the living room. Her head was turned away from the door and she didn't notice my presence. She lay there bathed in the sunlight that streamed in through the windows. Perhaps she thought I was asleep listening to the Schubert. She wore only the yellow bikini top, and she lay on her back and seemed to be fondling her own body. The sun stood still for me, as if eternity had crash landed and put a halt to time. Her sheer beauty, so familiar to me, but suddenly transformed and unearthly. The perfect young skin, the long blond hair swirled around her head and shoulders on the pillow. The fresh passion that flowed out of her to overwhelm me. She was unaware of the world around her.

But something bothered me. That insipid rock and roll on her radio. Megan never did exhibit any talent, interest or taste in good music, and she didn't realize how her poor musical choice clashed so jarringly with her own exquisite sensuality. The Schubert was just coming to my favorite song in the cycle—"Die liebe Farbe"¹—and the disturbing noise was going to spoil the unimaginable beauty of the scene.

I don't know who was more lost to reality—she or I—as I silently pushed the door open and entered her room. She seemed not to hear me as I approached her bed to eliminate the loathsome noise emanating from the ugly box on her pillow. As I leaned down to pick it up with my left hand, my robe opened inadvertently at my waist. As I straightened up and switched off her radio Megan whirled around to face me, surprised. She gasped as she saw my hand try to cover my crotch and she quickly covered herself with her right hand. She was Botticelli's Venus rising out of the seashell, with her blond hair—or was it the hair of Medusa?—streaming in the sunlight and summer air. "Who are you?" she asked, startled. She squinted as if she were blinded by the

¹ The favorite color.

sunlight and her pupils had not yet adjusted to the darker side of the room as she tried to focus on me. Then she realized it was her father and demanded, "What are you doing?" But I felt no need to reply, because at that moment Schubert answered from a distance, "In Grün will ich mich kleiden, in grüne Tränenweiden"²

She was flushed and breathing fast. Her green eyes were wide with surprise. Again she demanded, "What are you doing?" in a louder voice and began to prop herself up on one elbow. Again the song's refrain seemed like the perfect answer—"Mein Schatz hat's Grün so gern . . ."³—in a major key, and then in a minor key as I told her, "Nothing, I won't hurt you." I dropped her radio on the floor beside the bed and pushed her shoulder back down onto the mattress.

I kissed her on the forehead as I swiftly lowered myself onto her, saying "My beautiful daughter, my beautiful Megan." As I forced her, she began to cry out, "No! Don't! Stop it!" I had to cover her mouth with my hand to silence her as I was drawn into the vortex, and all I heard over my own pounding heart was, "Das Wild, das ich jage, das ist der Tod."⁴ I never listened to that particular song cycle again. Yet two lines of its enigmatic German text seemed to seal her fate and mine. They have haunted me day and night, as if those foreign words trailed our lives along in their wake, in a direction all their own: "Grabt mir ein Grab im Wasen, deckt mich mit grünen Rasen. . . ."⁵ Was it her grave or mine, or was it a grave prepared for both of us? Untold times I've asked myself why I didn't just step away from that moment before it overtook me.

It was a moment of infernal bliss. It lasted no time at all, and it came to an abrupt end, as if time turned itself back on with a vengeance. When I removed my hand from her mouth, she began to yell out hideously, and I became angry. No one could have heard her, and yet it was unsettling. I had to make her stop. I slapped her once on the cheek and then realized I didn't dare do anything that would leave a mark. She cried out even louder at this and began to hit me on the chest. I grabbed the belt from my robe which had slipped half-way off her bed and yanked it out of its loops. My first impulse was to whip her behind, but I feared she might be able to get away if I tried to turn her

² I mean to dress in green, in weeping willow branches.

³ My sweetheart likes green so.

⁴ The beast I stalk is death.

⁵ Dig me a grave in the meadow and cover me with green grass.

over. She had no chance with my weight on top of her, but as her hysteria grew and her screams became louder, the only alternative was to use the tie differently.

With much flailing of arms I managed to string it around her neck and tighten it enough that she could no longer speak. I tried to calm her down. I told her over and over how beautiful she was, that I loved her, I didn't want to hurt her, and that I hadn't hurt her. She continued to struggle and throw her head from side to side. I realized I'd have to use harsher measures. I stopped trying to persuade her of my harmless intentions. I switched on the voice of the father. "Megan, " I said sternly, as if she were a naughty five-year old, "you're going to stop this right now. Hold still and listen to me!" She kept on jerking and her eyes rolled back and forth. I tightened the tie around her neck to cut off her breath entirely, just long enough to get her to listen to reason. She stopped and now her eyes fixed on me. I said, "Megan, stop it this instant! You know you've been a bad girl, but I'm going to forgive you. You are never to say anything to anyone about this, because if you do, I will kill you."

I relaxed the tie around her neck, and she gasped for breath. I sat up at the side of the bed and picked up the robe. I stood up, put it on, pulled the belt back through the loopholes and tied it shut. Megan had pulled the bedspread over herself and was rubbing her neck with her hands. "Make your bed, take a shower and get dressed," I ordered her. "And remember, not a word—ever!"

Then something extraordinary happened. She let the spread slide off her body. Slowly and deliberately she stood up and turned toward me. I must have torn the top of her bathing suit off in my madness, for she was fully naked now. Standing there, very erect, she faced me like a marble statue and stared at me for a long moment from the other side of her bed, or rather through me, with an expression I had never seen on her face before, and which I could not describe in words, then or now. She said nothing to me, absolutely nothing—neither protest nor assent. She did not cry. Her eyes were blank. Something convinced me that she would obey my terrible order, and you will see that in the strict sense of the word she did.